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March 26, 2018

## Performing for Seniors: The Essential Guide for Musicians and Entertainers

I don't perform for many senior facilities, but I know some very talented people who do.

And lots of subscribers have been asking me for advice on this topic.

So, here's the first of two articles on the subject; this one a guest post from musician Allen Hopkins.



## **Singing for Senior Centers: “Nuts and Bolts”**

### **GUEST POST BY ALLEN HOPKINS**

A 50-year veteran of performing folk music, I have for the past 17 years been playing professionally as a full-time avocation.

No, I don’t support my family through music — though I do perform around 200 times per year.

Performing for seniors, in a variety of different locations and formats, makes up by far the largest proportion of my work; for example, out of 198 jobs I performed in 2016, 131 (66%) were “seniors” jobs.

Working with seniors, and with the staff and leadership of seniors’ residences and organizations, has given me quite a bit of experience in this field. This “nuts and bolts” manual is an attempt to share what expertise I have accumulated through trial and error.



I won't be attempting to discuss the therapeutic benefits of music, or the role of music, dance, theater, or other forms of entertainment in enhancing the quality of life for those considered "seniors." The assumption is that the performer has already considered these factors, and has decided that he/she wants to begin performing for seniors, on a regular basis. This decision may be based on the performer's skills, repertoire, and performance preferences; it may also involve consideration of the local "market" for musical performance.

## The Seniors' "Gig Market"

Demographic changes indicate that the number of US residents over the age of 65 is [growing fast](#), both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of our population.

The "baby boomer" generation, broadly defined as those born between 1946 and 1964, have all reached at least the AARP-eligible age of 50; this group remains the largest age cohort in our current population, based on the 76 million births occurring in those years.

The *current* population of seniors in residences is an older cohort, mainly born in the pre-WWII years, with an age range of, say, 75-95 years.

For the performer, the **market** for his/her services is usually concentrated on residence facilities designed for seniors:

- "assisted living" residences
- nursing homes

- retirement communities
- long-term care medical facilities, etc.

A related market includes social clubs, churches or temples, and public or private recreational and social facilities such as senior centers, adult recreation programs, and affinity clubs with a high proportion of senior members.

Locating and identifying these potential performance venues is not difficult; [Google](#) is your friend, and most areas have directories of seniors' facilities.

Many local governments have "Offices For the Aging" or similar programs, and these can provide listings of cultural and recreational opportunities for seniors which offer contacts for performers.

In addition, most of us have a general knowledge, and some personal experience, with seniors' facilities; we may have friends or relatives who reside there, or have family members there.

## Getting Booked in Seniors Centers

Once a performer has come up with potential venues for performance, the next task is to get his/her foot in the door.

What I did about a decade ago may be illustrative: I compiled a list of 25 or 30 residence facilities in the Rochester NY area. I was aided in this by having performed for several years for [ArtsReach](#), a small non-profit agency that sent performers to "under-served populations"; these included nursing homes, prisons, veterans' hospitals, group-home facilities for developmentally disabled, etc. This gave me a bit of a track record in performing for "special audiences."

I called each of the residences on my list, and obtained the name of its **recreation coordinator** — the person tasked with setting up entertainment for the residents.

I then sent a letter to each one, introducing myself, giving a brief resume that included places I was currently performing, and also mentioning some favorable references and comments I had received. I enclosed a business card. This approach got me several responses, and I was off and running.

## Pay for Senior Gigs

### (or should I volunteer?)

There is quite a bit of discussion and debate around this point. I almost invariably get paid for seniors' performances — not to say I *won't* do "freebies," but I'm well aware that every seniors' residence, nursing home, recreation program, and social club budgets for "outside" entertainment.

Some feel, strongly, that volunteering services for seniors' facilities is a *mitzvah*\*, and that charging their limited budgets, when "I/we don't need the money," is exploitive.

\*"*meritorious or charitable act*," from the Hebrew

I, on the other hand, feel that performing as a professional entertainer — including booking, preparation, reliable and punctual adherence to schedule, dependable performance quality (including special programs when requested), and overall value — is worth a reasonable fee.

What each performer charges for a seniors' performance, should be determined by his/her financial requirements, schedule preferences (a few higher-paid gigs, or lots of lower-priced ones?), and, primarily, by what the local market will bear.

My preference is for frequent activity at a reasonable price; I charge \$55-75 for a simple 60-minute performance, more for additional travel or equipment requirements.

Among the musicians “working the seniors’ circuit” in Rochester NY, **I am mid-to-low-priced**, and am booked more frequently than most others I know.

*Editor’s note – other musicians have told me they ask \$100-125 for these gigs, and try to do a 2-4 gigs per day whenever possible.*

## Online Presence

I maintain a website ([allenhopkins.org](http://allenhopkins.org)) with current schedules, descriptions of my programs, and other materials; it’s somewhat clunky, wordy and dated, but it does provide a destination for those searching online for folk music in our area.

In this digital era, most performers and potential performers have some sort of presence online, whether [Facebook](#) or whatever [other network](#) they prefer.

I would say that I don’t get many inquiries from seniors’ venues through this route, but I do find now that probably 75% of my booking activity is through email rather than by telephone, as in the past.

Overall, I would say that some type of online presence is a near-necessity.

## The Importance of Word Of Mouth

Whatever strategy a performer uses to get started, expansion of his/her schedule will largely result from **word-of-mouth referrals**.

Performing successfully, and recurrently, at a single facility produces inquiries from other possible venues. Recreation personnel do network, and refer performers; other performers also refer people they know, for potential jobs that they’re unable to schedule themselves.

I have frequently been on either side of this process. The flip-side is, of course, that a problem with a single performance can also reverberate through the network; it’s happened, though not, thankfully, to me.

## Follow-Up For Future Gigs

I produce a postcard schedule of my performances every 6-8 weeks, and send it to approximately 250 local and regional people, largely potential bookers.

I also prepare and send a weekly email newsletter, with some news as well as my performance calendar, to around twice that number of friends, news media, and current and potential bookers.



(Recipients include not only seniors' venues, but libraries, clubs, historical societies, local festivals — anyone who's booked me in the past, and prospects for the future.)

Since I enjoy writing, and select topics aside from strict self-promotion, the newsletter seems well received. The cost of the postcard mailing — I do all the work of copying, sizing, addressing, stamping and mailing at home — is about \$100 per issue, and I almost always get more than that amount in bookings immediately after it's received.

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of undertaking these mailings, and I've found them very useful.

## **It's Time to Do The Gig!**

Having gone through all the steps to obtain seniors' gigs, and having one or more bookings in hand, what can be expected?

## **Performance Length**

I'd estimate that 90% of the gigs I play are for 60 minutes, though that may combine two half-hour gigs at two locations in the same facility.

## **What Time of Day, and Day of the Week?**

The most frequent time for performances is the early afternoon on a weekday; of the 127 seniors' jobs I played in 2015, 87 — over two-thirds — started between 1:30 and 3 p.m.

For this reason, it's difficult for a performer to do a lot of seniors' work and maintain a day job.

## Performance Space

This can vary quite a bit, and will naturally influence the equipment a performer needs.

Small living rooms or lounges are often used for performances; another favorite space is a facility's dining room.

Some seniors' residences have larger auditoriums, to which the residents are brought for performances; this, of course, involves transporting a larger number of people, often with diminished mobility.

I do a few outdoor gigs every year, and also some off-site events for special occasions.

## Audience Size and Composition

Again, this can be all over the lot; I find myself performing for as few as a half-dozen residents, and for as many as 100 or more.

Of course, audience size influences my preparation for the gig, and the term "seniors" can include a wide variety of audiences; it may mean a group aged in their 60's, who drive themselves to a senior center for lunch. Or it may mean nursing home residents, average age 85, with severe physical and intellectual limitations, who could have trouble comprehending, much less appreciating, the program.

How a performer adjusts to provide the best program is a function of **a)** pre-event discussions with the sponsor, **b)** flexibility, and **c)** experience.

## Equipment Considerations

As a folk musician, my programs consist of vocals with instrumental accompaniment.

To almost all my seniors' gigs, I bring an acoustic guitar, five-string banjo, and [taropatch](#) (double-strung ukulele).

I also have a gig bag containing harmonicas, tuners, neck rack for harmonica/guitar playing, and miscellaneous other gear.

If I know I will be playing in a living room format to a small group, I usually leave it at that. Over half of seniors' jobs, however, have sufficiently large performance spaces, or audience size, to make some amplification beneficial.



### Fender Amp Can

For those larger gigs, I bring a small battery amplifier (Fender Amp Can), two inexpensive dynamic microphones (vocal and instrumental), a mic stand with a clip-on side boom, and related cabling.

Some facilities may have “house sound,” and I have used this on occasion, but as a rule I’m more comfortable with my own, familiar equipment.

I often also bring a folding stool, and stands to accommodate the three instruments.

I find the small (10 watts) amplifier provides adequate sound for almost all my gigs, and avoids the hassling with larger sound equipment that adds time and logistical complication.

When playing a larger auditorium, or large outdoor space, I will bring a “column” PA; I use the [Fishman SA-220 SoloAmp](#), which is adequate for up to 300 audience size.

I will also often use condenser microphones, utilizing the phantom power the PA provides. The SoloAmp sets up easily, and provides all the sound I’ve ever needed.

Considering [use of a sound system](#), remember that many seniors have some loss of hearing, and so amplification may be appropriate in situations where it normally wouldn’t be used.

And it’s crucial to try to **enunciate lyrics clearly**, perhaps speak a bit slower; I have been complimented by senior audiences, saying they could “understand the words” — important to their involvement and enjoyment.



## Songs for Senior Center Gigs

In determining what music to play, it helps to have more detailed information about the expected audience.

For example, those in their 80's who grew up in the 1940's, will enjoy folk and popular songs they remember from that period.

Younger audiences may appreciate 1950's material, and even more recent popular songs.

I try to include older songs that are part of the American musical tradition, from [Stephen Foster](#) to [George M. Cohan](#), and a few “chestnuts” that most of us learned as kids, such as *You Are My Sunshine*, *I've Been Working On the Railroad*, and *Goodnight Irene*.

I'm frequently asked for specific programs — Irish songs for St. Patrick's Day, patriotic songs for July 4 or Memorial Day — and even more specifically, for historically-themed programs such as railroad songs, Erie Canal songs, etc.

And I try to vary my repertoire seasonally, going from *Let It Snow* and *Winter Wonderland*, to *April Showers*, *Summertime*, *Autumn Leaves*, and so forth.

While the core of my seniors' repertoire has remained fairly unchanged for years, I'm always adding and subtracting at the margins.

I'll include some repertoire suggestions as an appendix at the end of this article.

## Managing The Performance

In my opinion, the more [audience involvement](#), in the form of chorus singing, clapping, foot tapping etc. that I am able to arouse, the more successful I feel.

My objective is not just entertainment, it is **participation**, since music is said to reach parts of the brain that remain responsive even when other types of social interaction are impaired.

Looking into the audience, and seeing lips moving to the lyrics even when the “singing” is inaudible, tells me that listeners are getting something from the program.

Research indicates that active involvement enhances music's neurological benefits, and that music can access memories that are not accessed in routine social interaction — one reason that it's often [used therapeutically](#) in seniors' facilities.

## Remember the Staff!

While I want to entertain audiences, I always remember that it's the *staff* that I need to please; after all, they are the ones who will (or won't) ask me to return.

Positive contacts prior to a gig, a written or verbal “Thank you” afterwards, and accommodation to the specific needs of a particular venue, go a long way toward building an ongoing relationship.

And, of course, reliability: showing up on time, prepared, and providing a predictable, professional program.

Over half the seniors’ performances I give every year are for a half-dozen places that book me multiple times: sometimes monthly — I’ve played a particular residence the first Tuesday of each month, for 12 years — sometimes more frequently — as of April, I’ve already performed at one nursing home ten times this year — sometimes three or four times over 12 months.

One way a performer can ingratiate him/herself with staff is by readiness to fill in on short notice when another performer has to cancel; I have been awakened by a phone call asking if I can be at a gig in 45 minutes, and have taken the job, certainly earning Brownie points, and consideration for future gigs.

*For further reading, see the article [How NOT To Get Bookings](#)*

## **Payment Considerations**

I find it important to keep good financial records, and to manage “accounts receivable.” I report all music income for tax purposes, as Schedule C personal income; I keep track of and report music-related expenses, mileage, etc.

I receive IRS 1099’s from the seniors’ facilities for whom I perform frequently, and on occasion issue them to other musicians who join me for jobs where I’m the primary “contractor.”

Others may choose to treat their music, dance, or other artistic activities less formally, especially if it’s not their primary vocation, but I would caution that many facilities will require an IRS W-4 form, and keep records of payments to “independent contractor” musicians.

Over the course of 15 years or so of playing professionally at seniors’ facilities, it has been necessary on several occasions to follow up and solve payment issues. Recreation staff members who do the scheduling, may not be painstaking in submitting payment requests to their financial offices, and you may realize after a month that no check has shown up in your mail.

Staff turnover, frequent at seniors’ facilities, leads to problems along the “learning curve.” To further complicate matters, many for-profit facilities are part of national chains, and your payment comes from “Corporate” in another state.

I keep spreadsheets of my gigs, including information about date, time, location, mileage, payment receipt, and a contact name and phone for follow-up if needed.

## **Do I Need Insurance to Perform in Senior Centers?**

Recently, I was asked to submit proof of liability insurance, before being given bookings at certain facilities.

My basic homeowner's liability doesn't include "outside" performance for profit. Since up to now this has happened only once or twice, I haven't acquired performer's insurance, but it may become more of an issue.

The [American Federation of Musicians](#), the musicians' union, offers insurance to its members, and has formed Local 1000, specifically for folk and traveling musicians.

I have also been asked, as a condition of playing for a local government, to obtain a waiver of workers' compensation insurance — again, a one-time occurrence — but this only involved obtaining and completing a form that exempted me from workers' comp coverage.

## **Problems and Pitfalls With Senior Entertainment**

Playing for seniors ain't for everyone. There are inherent factors leading some to find it not to their liking.

A few that come to mind:

### **Songwriters beware**

Since I'm not a writer myself, I'm extrapolating, but in my experience, seniors prefer material with which they're familiar. Songwriters I know, who also do seniors' work, usually don't do original material for these gigs. There are some songwriters — Alan Power comes to mind — whose "day job" is working with seniors, and who have written songs on that subject; their songs may be well-received. For the rest of us, I would choose songs that people in the age group for whom I'm performing, presumably have heard before.

### **"They fell asleep!"**

Yeah, that happens. Remember, many seniors' jobs are scheduled in the early afternoon, right after lunch. As I cruise deeper into my 70's, I appreciate more the afternoon nap, and a warm room, soft chair, full stomach and soothing music may lull some listeners to Dreamland. Can't let it bother us.

### **Inappropriate behavior**

One of the aspects of advanced age can be dementia, in mild or not-so-mild forms, and one of the aspects of dementia can be inability to read social cues, or adhere to behavioral norms. If this leads to aggressive acts, it can tax the performer's resources to keep the program going and reach other audience members. Experience will help in handling this, as well good staff support — which leads to the next topic...

### **Where's the staff?**

Staff members who provide routine care and supervision at residences, are underpaid and overworked, in many cases. Some may see the entertainment program as a "break" for themselves, and may leave the performance area inadequately supervised. If that gets coupled with inappropriate behavior, or with physical risks for some of the seniors, it becomes difficult to deal with. I've seen my share of falls, arguments, disruption etc. without adequate staff response.

## The rut

I find myself reprising the same 25-plus-or-minus songs for years. Seniors' audiences as a rule don't mind repetition. In many cases, they don't remember, from one visit to the next, what was played the last time. It's up to the performer to keep him/herself fresh, find new material, keep interested and motivated enough to deliver a good show each time out.

## Playing For Seniors Can Be Very Satisfying!

I find playing for senior audiences extremely gratifying overall.

Seniors often express their gratitude to performers, compliment them fulsomely. Staff and family members also show their appreciation.

The performer is providing a real service, and contributing to the health of the audience, as well as entertaining.

There's little pressure to be "show biz" or to crank up the volume or the stage persona. Competent, professional performance is welcome, and performers feel that they're doing a good thing.

Over the course of years, establishing good ongoing relationships with various senior facilities, developing and maintaining a strong, flexible program of music (or dance, theater, storytelling, whatever) that's suited to the needs and preferences of seniors, honing the craft until it becomes second nature — it's a place where art, service, holistic therapy, and intergenerational care intersect.

Can't do better than that.

*This article was originally written for a 2017 presentation at the New England Folk Festival Association (NEFFA) by Allen Hopkins and Jan Maier.*

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## Appendix

# Illustrative Examples of Repertoire

### Guitar (\*Harmonica)

*You Are My Sunshine\**  
*Hey, Good Lookin'\**  
*Don't Fence Me In\**  
*Tennessee Waltz\**  
*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot\**  
*He's Got the Whole World In His Hands\**  
*King Of the Road*  
*Dream* (Everly Brothers)  
*In My Merry Oldsmobile*  
*Goodnight Irene*  
*The Unicorn*  
*Oh My Darling Clementine*  
*Those Were the Days\**  
*Summertime\**  
*So Long, It's Been Good To Know You\**

### Ukulele (\*Harmonica)

*Side By Side*  
*Que Sera Sera*  
*Dream a Little Dream of Me*  
*It Had To Be You*  
*Five Foot Two*  
*My Blue Heaven*  
*Chattanooga Choo Choo*  
*Sentimental Journey\**  
*I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now*  
*Shine On, Harvest Moon*  
*Autumn Leaves\**

*Once In a While*  
*Let It Snow*  
*Winter Wonderland*  
*Once In Love With Amy*

## **Banjo**

*Oh Susannah*  
*Camptown Races*  
*Old Folks At Home*  
*Country Roads*  
*Place In the Choir*  
*I've Been Working On the Railroad*  
*Medley: You're a Grand Old Flag/Yankee Doodle Dandy/God Bless America*  
*She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain*  
*This Land Is Your Land*

## **Example of a St. Patrick's Day program**

### **Guitar (\*harmonica)**

*Molly Malone*  
*Toora Loora Loora\**  
*When Irish Eyes Are Smiling\**  
*Gypsy Rover*  
*My Wild Irish Rose\**  
*Wild Rover*  
*Black Velvet Band*

### **Banjo (\*kazoo)**

*Murshin Durkin*  
*Rambles of Spring*  
*Boys Won't Leave the Girls Alone*  
*Whiskey In the Jar*  
*MacNamara's Band\**  
*Jug of Punch*

### **Concertina**

*Danny Boy*  
*Si Beag Si Mor*  
*South Wind/Girl I Left Behind Me*

## **Example of a holiday (Christmas/Chanukah) program**

### **Guitar (\*harmonica)**

*Deck the Halls\**  
*Little Drummer Boy*  
*Children, Go Where I Send Thee*  
*Scarlet Ribbons*  
*Hot Buttered Rum*  
*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*  
*Dreydl Song\**

### **Banjo**

*Jingle Bells*  
*Twelve Days of Christmas*  
*Jolly Old St. Nicholas*

### **Ukulele**

*Frosty the Snowman*  
*Santa Claus Is Coming to Town*

### **Concertina**

*Rock of Ages (Ma'oz Tzur)*  
*What Child Is This*  
*Carol Medley*

### **Kalimba (“thumb piano”)**

*Silent Night*

## About The Author



[Allen Hopkins](#) has played folk music in the Rochester NY area for nearly 50 years, including bluegrass, blues, Celtic, klezmer, old-time, and contemporary “folk.” He plays a variety of stringed and free-reed instruments, has an oversized accumulation of guitars, banjos, mandolins, concertinas etc., and teaches at the Hochstein School of Music and elsewhere.

He is a co-founder of Rochester’s *Golden Link Folk Singing Society*, organizer of the *Flint Hill Folk* program at Genesee Country Village and co-producer of its annual *Fiddlers’ Fair*; and helps administer two local concert series, *Tunes By the Tracks* and *Rochester Folkus*.

Allen has served on staff of *Folk Music Week* and *Traditional Music & Dance Week* at Pinewoods Camp in MA, as well as staffing many folk weekends and local festivals, including 23 consecutive years at the *New England Folk Festival (NEFFA)*. He specializes in folk and popular music programs for seniors, playing over 150 gigs annually.

## About The Blog

The [Educate and Entertain blog](#) provides articles, tips, encouragements, and how-to’s for regional performers (in any region) interested in making a great full-time living in the arts.

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42 Responses to Performing for Seniors: The Essential Guide for Musicians and Entertainers

1. *Hugo Buchanan*

[September 25, 2018 at 5:35 pm](#)

Hi Allen, My name is Hugo Buchanan. Enjoyed your article about getting gigs in nursing homes, etc. I am retired, 85 yrs old. Most of the songs I play/sing are 50s & 60s country, folk, and pop, and nowadays about the only venue for this era is nursing homes, etc. I have been registered for quite some time with a booking agency (Gigmasters), but what few gig alerts I do get for nursing homes, I have been unsuccessful in scoring a gig. I somehow feel that the people that review my gig bid are millennials who could care less about the era of music I perform, and want to choose someone with a more up to date era of their liking. I am in the process of ordering some business cards, and thought I would try “in person” inquiry about getting a few gigs. Any suggestions? Hugo

[Reply](#)

2. *Will McMillan*

[September 7, 2018 at 11:32 am](#)

Thank you, Allen, for writing this great article and thank you, Dave, for sharing it with us via your hugely helpful web site. I like Allen’s post card promo idea. These days sending a piece of snail mail may be more effective/welcomed than sending an email...It costs more in terms of time and money, but it may reap more benefits in the long run. I agree entirely about the value of word-of-mouth, and I am a huge fan of hand-written thank you notes after each engagement. I have had recreation directors tell me that my card is the FIRST TIME anyone they have booked has sent them anything like that... I am a singer and avid reader of biographies/autobiographies about/by songwriters and musicians. I work with a jazz pianist, and we put together hour-long programs of music featuring songs plus a few stories about how particular songs came to be written. So far we’ve created programs about Harold Arlen, The Gershwin brothers, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein,

Lorenz Hart, Jule Styne, Sammy Cahn, and Harry Warren — as well as programs about Ethel Merman and Fred Astaire (for whom a tremendous number of great songs were written...) I share the sentiments of one person who wrote a comment about ASCAP/BMI (hopefully) not hitting retirement communities up for expensive licensing fees which might deter them from booking musical entertainment. I also agree that the most satisfying and successful gigs for me include LOTS of audience participation in the form of singing and humming. And hanging around afterwards to chat with residents and staff members can also be very emotionally rewarding (as well as a wise tactic to increase the likelihood of being asked back...)

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[September 7, 2018 at 2:16 pm](#)

Howdy Will – I agree with everything you’ve said here! Snail mail is probably far more effective now than it was when everyone was doing it. Word of mouth is king in my experience too, and I get the same comments from venues when I send a thank-you note (which I do every single time). Best of luck with your shows! As has been said here many times in the past, Themed Shows Get Booked!

[Reply](#)

3. *Clare*

[September 6, 2018 at 11:25 pm](#)

Great info, Allen and Dave! I’m just getting into performing at senior centers and this is very helpful — and very generous of you to share your repertoire!

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[September 7, 2018 at 9:08 am](#)

So glad to hear that Clare!

[Reply](#)

4. *Sonorei*

[September 5, 2018 at 12:43 am](#)

Enjoyed every word. I will e mail Allen Hopkins within a day or two. Need a special advice Please read my message Thanks in advance! Sora

[Reply](#)

5. *Jay Isaacson*

[August 27, 2018 at 12:18 pm](#)

Hi Dave, you mention that this is “the first of two articles on the subject” ... so I’m just curious when we might see the second article!

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[August 27, 2018 at 1:11 pm](#)

Great question Jay. I had two more contributors lined up, but one of them has not gotten back to me with answers to the questions I sent, so I don't quite have enough for another article yet.

[Reply](#)

6. *Linda Bernstein*

[August 25, 2018 at 11:24 pm](#)

Do you ever have to get licenses or permissions from ASCAP or other organizations to use copyrighted songs in your performance? I like to sing Broadway tunes and have been told one needs to get a license and/or permission to sing these protected songs.

[Reply](#)

o *Dave Ruch*

[August 27, 2018 at 7:45 am](#)

I'm afraid I don't know the answer to that, as I don't do these gigs myself, but maybe someone else can chime in here...

[Reply](#)

o *Allen Hopkins*

[August 27, 2018 at 12:41 pm](#)

It's the responsibility of the presenting organization, not the performer, to obtain any required licenses. The facility where you perform is the one that needs to worry about ASCAP, BMI, or any other licensing group that requires payment for use of licensed material. Whether a nursing home or a seniors' residence is properly licensed, is between that facility and ASCAP etc.

[Reply](#)

7. *Jocelyn Michelle*

[August 22, 2018 at 4:08 pm](#)

Wow!! I'm a singer/songwriter & blessed granddaughter 😊 I've very recently decided to do a special birthday show at my grandfather's seniors condo. As a frequent performer in my late teen's & early twenties I performed for all ages but have been away from the stage for over 10 years! I have only read your one article on performing for seniors but the information was invaluable!!! Also, the addition of your set list was a fantastic surprise!! Thank you for taking the time to share your obvious wealth of knowledge & valuable insight!! 😊😊 All the best to you!

[Reply](#)

o *Allen Hopkins*

[August 27, 2018 at 11:11 pm](#)

Thanx for your comments. I'm very fortunate to have found and developed a "niche" playing music in my community (Rochester NY). So far this year I've booked about 165 gigs, with the usual ratio that two-thirds are for senior audiences. And I also notice that, at performances not specifically ID'ed as "seniors," a significant proportion of the audience is AARP-eligible. Getting back from a small

regional old-time festival last weekend, I find I have two seniors' jobs tomorrow. I think you'll find that the performer gets quite a bit of joy out of playing this type of gig, as well as providing joy to the audience.

[Reply](#)

8. *Louanges*

[May 30, 2018 at 12:57 am](#)

Is there any official education, training, or other qualification needed to call oneself an Elder Care Music Specialist? I have plenty of experience in playing for seniors, volunteer until the last three years. But I've played in senior living facilities, all levels of care, at Hospice upon the invitation of families (not as a Music Therapist) at the private homes of seniors, at memorial services, etc. My level of musicianship is high. Might I use this "title" without concern about potential liability? How might I be sure? Thank you.

[Reply](#)

o *Allen Hopkins*

[August 27, 2018 at 12:51 pm](#)

In answer to your two inquiries: don't call yourself a music therapist, since that is a formal discipline that requires licensing. "Elder Care Music Specialist" would be OK, since it's basically a descriptor of your performance approach and repertoire. Might add a bit of gravitas to your resume, although there's no formal definition of what an Elder Care Music Specialist is...

[Reply](#)

9. *Louanges*

[May 30, 2018 at 12:28 am](#)

Thank you so much for the informative article! I've been doing this type of work in senior living facilities for nearly three years now. Still a rookie! But now there are a few home health agencies who are interested in me doing private concerts for their clients. I am honored and interested, but they are referring to me as a music therapist. I don't have that training. What might I call myself?

[Reply](#)

o *Ashira Malka*

[May 30, 2018 at 1:00 am](#)

What about 'musical memory assistant?' because music helps with memory ... or memory-assisting musician, brain enlivener, healing helper (You can see I like alliteration.), therapeutic non-therapist, mind-melding musician (Okay, I'm sure you won't actually like any of these, but they're ideas!), music healer, mind-awakener, or musicoach?

[Reply](#)

10. *Tom Schlater*

[March 28, 2018 at 8:35 am](#)

Thank you, Allen, for writing this article, and thank you, Dave, for publishing it.

Here is our (my wife & I) retirement home performance background:

I played 1 – 5 retirement home gigs a month when I was in optometry college in Columbus, OH, back in the mid 1990s.

In 2002 my mother-in-law moved into a retirement community in Virginia Beach, and she asked my wife to put on a show. (My wife sang, accompanied by her guitar playing, 6 – 7 nights a week for 6 years in folk clubs and hotels in the Philippines and Japan when she was in her late teens & early 20s.) Her mom's invitation and the wonderful reception that she received, along with my enthusiastic encouragement, launched our (very part time) retirement home career. (I am the roadie, guitar noodler and comic spoof / diversion. Rose is The Star of The Show, and I refuse to take a cut of the paycheck) Our career "peaked", in terms of quantity of gigs, in 2008, when we were putting on 6 – 10 shows a month. When the economy crashed, nearly every facility that had welcomed us enthusiastically from 3 – 12 times a year totally stopped funding entertainment. Meanwhile, our lives entered another phase as we became grandparents and I ramped up my optometry career, and we still do 1 – 3 shows a month. Our main show is oldies from 1900 – 1960. We also have shows of all Irish, all hispanic, all patriotic, and all Christmas music. Our performances are nearly always for 1 hour. Rose's fee is usually \$100, sometimes a little more or a little less.

I can echo and agree with almost EVERYTHING that Allen said. I would add:

– The comment that spoke to me the loudest, BY FAR, was that putting on 200 shows a year is not adequate to support a family. Sad reality, but true.

– Rose has a bag full of various dollar store variety shakers and bangers, mostly maracas. About halfway through our show she passes them out while I play a solo rendition of "Guantanamera", then she picks up her guitar and belts out a rollicking rendition of "La Bamba". Most of the rest of our show is pretty upbeat, and many of the seniors enjoy participating and being our rhythm section. We also have seniors who get up and dance through many of our selections. There are people singing along with EVERY song that we do in our standard "oldies" program. The point being that any way you can get the audience to participate is great!

– The observation about insurance was interesting. Someone made a similar observation recently on the Delcamp classical guitar forum. What I keep waiting for is ASACAP / BMI to come in and demand licensing fees, which will shut down the 90 % of the remaining business, just like it did to live music in bars and restaurants back in the latter half of the 20th century.

– Allen's observation about lack of staff members on hand at many performances is true, and an alarming safety violation.

– As Allen and other commenters have mentioned, seniors are usually the most appreciative audience.

### [Reply](#)

- *Tom Schlater*  
[March 28, 2018 at 8:51 am](#)

In regards to ethical perspective on performing for free vs performing for pay, my opinion is that since most of these facilities are owned and run by VERY PROFITABLE companies that charge the seniors and or their families VERY HIGH fees, I have no reservations about charging for professional quality entertainment.

### [Reply](#)

- *Dave Ruch*  
[March 28, 2018 at 7:32 pm](#)

“seniors are usually the most appreciative audience.”

Seniors and kids, Tom! Thanks for your comments.

[Reply](#)

11. *Aspen Black*  
[March 27, 2018 at 2:54 pm](#)

I have done some performing for seniors over the years. I agree that the market is tougher when pay is involved. Most everyone in my area plays senior facilities for free, so asking for pay is generally met with a look of “Why should we? We get all sorts of musicians for free and we’re pleased to continue in that manner.” That said, I have been paid well for senior programs that have been booked through humanities outreaches or arts councils in other areas of the country. As for the covers vs originals, of course people like to hear the songs they know. That is a general rule for bars and restaurants, too. That said, songwriters should not feel defeated. I have been very successful with playing a set of mostly originals at several of my paid senior gigs. If you set up the song with a story, especially one they can interact with (and you let them talk with you – don’t shut them out!) they get into the songs and often engage in further conversation afterwards based on your lyrics. Often I’ll be told that one, or more, of my lyrics brought back a memory, of course of which they share the story of after the show. I get similar interaction after my concerts for the general public. For seniors, though, this connection is invaluable. So many of these people are lonely, cut-off from life as we know it, living in their minds, affected by memory loss, and a myriad of other ailments. Some, are active and healthy. But, people need to talk and if my songs get them talking, thinking, remembering, reliving, I’ve done my job. I’ve had them laugh and cry in equal measure, yet say it was wonderful to do so (either, or both). Once, a resident asked if he could sit in with me on guitar. It turns out that he played some decent leads (and, yes, I chose familiar songs for him to join in on). Afterwards, the nurses came up to me and were beside themselves. They said he’s been there six months and reclusive. They couldn’t believe that he was so engaged and talkative! Another time, I was in a memory care unit, and a lady of 75, or so, came up to me, between the introduction to my song and the first chord and said “Where can I go to pee-pee and poo-poo? I need to know where I can go!” She was quite distressed and absolutely serious. Luckily, I saw the bathroom door not far across the room behind her and pointed the way. She went. Then she returned, farther down in the show and urgently asked “Where can I sit down?” I directed her to the chair in front of me and she tapped her hand on her thigh in rhythm for the rest of the show. You never know what you’ll get and you just have to roll with it. Music may be our medium, but interacting with people is our job.

[Reply](#)

- *Dave Ruch*  
[March 27, 2018 at 3:46 pm](#)

So many things to love about your post Aspen! And thanks for the encouragement for those who write their own music.

“Music may be our medium, but interacting with people is our job.”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard it put any better. Cheers!

[Reply](#)

12. *Rochelle Christopher*[March 27, 2018 at 2:36 pm](#)

I charge \$125 for my shows done near the Philadelphia area in retirement communities and in libraries. and \$175 for shows that are farther away. And i charge double on weekends. Remember that my shows are NOT music—they are educational presentations. A retirement community also has to meet MY requirements before I will market to them. My requirements are that they not be subsidized, and that they have a website and a full-time activities professional. I rarely do homes where people have dementia. My shows are designed for independent living communities and assisted living communities only. I make that VERY clear when I first approach a retirement community. And i tell people that i won't do the presentation if the audience doesn't meet this requirement. I get paid no matter how the audience reacts. That is not a hard and fast rule, Sometimes the activities director WILL make a mistake and I work with them to correct it but that doesn't mean I'll waive my fee. At first I used to choke on the double for weekend cost but I don't anymore. People have asked me why I charge double on weekends and I'm very up front about it—I don't want to work on weekends. Also I notice that the closer I get to New York City, the more times I am questioned about what I charge, People are concerned that I'm not charging enough.

The Council on Humanities in Delaware only pays a speaker \$50 per show. I can't work for that. The Humanities Council in New Jersey won't take me on because I'm not affiliated with a college. The Pennsylvania Council on Humanities never seems to have openings for new speakers.

I've been doing this for 6 years. I pretty much charge what i want and every time my rates go up, I'm aware that some people might drop out because they can't afford it. In most cases, my reputation precedes me, and they pay what I ask. As much as i ask on weekends, people still pay.

[Reply](#)◦ *Dave Ruch*[March 27, 2018 at 3:41 pm](#)

Excellent advice Rochelle!

[Reply](#)13. *Bob Lusk*[March 27, 2018 at 1:57 pm](#)

My average gig for a nursing home in NY was always \$150. Some more some less. Better pay in bigger cities. My experience moving to Florida is the average pay is \$50. The reason I believe is that there are so many really good retired musicians down here willing to do it for free.

[Reply](#)◦ *Dave Ruch*[March 27, 2018 at 3:39 pm](#)

Makes sense, Bob. Thanks for sharing that.

[Reply](#)14. *Glenn Miller*[March 27, 2018 at 1:02 pm](#)

Sadly your very low fees actually cripple talent that  
Requires more money. Again , I suppose you found out that most health care professionals hire price, NOT talent or even what the audience  
prefers.  
Thanks for your opinion.

[Reply](#)

- *Dave Ruch*  
[March 27, 2018 at 3:38 pm](#)

Hi Glenn – I can't speak for the author, but here's my two cents – –

Nobody owes us a great wage we can live on; it's up to us to cultivate those opportunities. We also happen to live in a free market economy. There will ALWAYS be people willing to play for little or no money, and that is perfectly within their rights. And there will always be venues that will gravitate to booking those free and low-paid performers because of their various situations. Again, they have their own reasons for doing that and who are we to say they are wrong? It's what works for them. I don't do these senior center gigs precisely because I can't make a living doing them, and I rely on performing to feed my family of four. If you can differentiate yourself enough from the free and "cheap" performers to command a higher fee, that should be your goal. But otherwise, it might be best to find alternate performance venues that will pay you what you need. This blog is full of articles on how to think about accomplishing that.

[Reply](#)

- *Glenn Miller*  
[March 27, 2018 at 3:57 pm](#)

Well said and explained! I do agree . Thanks!

[Reply](#)

- *Allen Hopkins*  
[March 27, 2018 at 4:05 pm](#)

Well, I charge a rate that works for me, and for the venues that book me. While I consider myself a "full-time musician" — it's my major activity — I am a retiree with civil service pension and Social Security, and don't rely on my musical earnings to support my wife and myself. Among the musicians I know in my area, my fees are around the "going rate," though some do charge more, and some less. And of course some do it on a volunteer basis, which is admirable as well. I think it's a bit unrealistic to project that if all entertainers raised our fees, the nursing homes and seniors' residences would simply increase their payments. I would expect, rather, that they would book fewer "outside" entertainment programs, and rely more on their paid recreation staff, who provide the bulk of programming now; we are the exceptions. Going rates will vary by area, definitely, and also by type of entertainment. I think discussions of what each seniors' entertainer charges, are a bit beside the points I was trying to make in my article. I encourage all entertainers on the "seniors' circuit" to charge whatever they think is fair! For myself, I'm glad to get a large number of jobs at an affordable hourly rate; YMMV — "your mileage may vary," as they say.

[Reply](#)

15. *howard gordon*



[March 26, 2018 at 8:31 pm](#)

OH and I usually charge about \$60-70 for a show

[Reply](#)

16. *howard gordon*

[March 26, 2018 at 8:29 pm](#)

that was very insightful ( and interesting) whereas I am a puppeteer in Melbourne, florida  
I have been doing puppets for 40+ yrs for all kinds of venues and age groups. and I do a lot of senior places using recorded music ( that they know) and they love it . I do 1/2 hour or so ,because of attention span. but the hardest thing for me is when after calling for the activities director ,they don't call back !!!! or there is NO budget . OR even worse : "oh we don't do puppets here, they would not want that here" so I keep on going and performing , I love what I do well thank you.(I am on facebook under > OUR FATHER"S PUPPETS

[Reply](#)

17. *Stan Ransom*

[March 26, 2018 at 5:45 pm](#)

Good article for performing for seniors. I have done a lot of performing at nursing homes and hospitals. They tell me to perform at 10-11 am, before lunch, when the seniors are awake. they conk out after 12:30pm and can't stay awake. Maybe Allen's seniors are able to stay awake! I am still performing at 90 years old (as of Jan. 24). Play music every day, volunteer 15 hours a week at the hospital library, and am in 4 or 5 organizations. Gotta Keep Playing!

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[March 26, 2018 at 5:46 pm](#)

Awesome, Stan! Keep on keeping on...

[Reply](#)

18. *Amy Conley*

[March 26, 2018 at 4:39 pm](#)

Thanks Dave and thank you Allen for the beautiful article. I also love singing for Seniors. It is fun and so meaningful.

[Reply](#)

19. *Tom Hipps*

[March 26, 2018 at 12:56 pm](#)

Thank you for a comprehensive and helpful article. I've been entertaining at Senior Communities for over two years now. After a 17-year detour into the property management business, I've come back to being a full-time musician, and my experience managing rental communities gives me additional insight into the workings of that type of facility, and the daily routines of the people who hire me. Generally, I can fill most

weekend evenings with bookings, but the weekday work at senior communities is crucial to my survival. It's become a wonderful and integral niche. And, I find that my nightclub, wine bar, supper club and private party audiences rarely compare with the warm, appreciative response I receive at my senior gigs. If I may add one thing to your article: At the conclusion of each performance, I "work the room"... I meet-and-greet with as many as I can. Just a simple "thank you for coming today" makes them happy, and gives them a chance to tell me they enjoyed the show... I think most of us, when we enjoy a program, like to convey that to the artist, and make a personal connection, however brief. Usually, I shake hands, but once in awhile someone wants to give me a hug, and I'm receptive to that as well.

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[March 26, 2018 at 1:36 pm](#)

I love that, Tom. Thanks for sharing.

[Reply](#)

20. *Shane Thomas*

[March 26, 2018 at 12:32 pm](#)

Thank you so much for this post Dave. I was wanting to start performing or seniors and this post gave me direction!

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[March 26, 2018 at 1:35 pm](#)

Glad to hear it Shane.

[Reply](#)

21. *Rochelle Christopher*

[March 26, 2018 at 10:46 am](#)

I can add to this since I don't do musical performances but I DO perform in retirement communities.

I help lifelong learners use history to connect the past with their everyday lives. Generally I do a powerpoint presentation and narration about some aspect of American history. I've been doing this for 6 years now. this last year, an activities director came to me and asked me to do a special show for August about Princess Diana. I did a special promotion to that chain and she wrote to everyone in the chain in the area and told them about the show. I couldn't have asked for better publicity.

I charge about \$125 per show and mileage. My shows are an hour long. An activities director recently told me, "I trust you. I know you'll put on a good show."

Honestly that reputation and that kind of confidence in my work is priceless. It makes doing all the marketing and preparation worthwhile.

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[March 26, 2018 at 10:50 am](#)

Thanks Rochelle! Great to have your experiences here.

[Reply](#)

■ *Sonia Tovar*

[September 13, 2018 at 8:14 am](#)

Where do you meet and when..

[Reply](#)

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